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FILE ONLY

Guarding the revolution's Islamic standards

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Few Iranians can escape slight feelings of apprehension when the bright yellow Nissan patrol wagons of the Pasdaran drive by.

The strict-looking young men patrolling the streets have the power to arrest anyone they feel is out of line with the government's Islamic standards. Even the police are not able to question the actions of the Pasdaran, or Revolutionary Guards.

Besides being "guardians of social morality," the Pasdaran are responsible for both internal and external state security. Some Iranians call them "Khomeini's private army."

Domestically, they are a parallel but much more powerful force than the police. Armed with assault rifles, they patrol the streets of every town and village in Iran from bases called *komitehs* (from the French pronunciation of the word committee).

The military arm, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, directs and has at times participated in the human-wave attacks in Iran's war against Iraq. These attacks are mostly carried out by the Basij, or militia, who are generally volunteers recruited from rural areas.

The Pasdaran became institutionalized from the local vigilante squads that sprang up after Iran's 1979 revolution, when the Shah was ousted.

The Pasdaran now have their own ministry, which reports directly to Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's religious leader to whom the Constitution has granted supreme authority. One American expert on the Middle East estimates the Pasdaran forces number more than 250,000.

Both branches of Pasdaran are made up strictly of volunteers who are motivated by a deep religious and patriotic sense.

"I had wanted to study medicine, but it was too expensive," says one civil Pasdar in Bandar Abbas.

"After the war started, I felt I should do something for my country so I joined the Pasdaran instead, to serve either here or at the front."

Most of these volunteers are between 16 and 24 or 45 and 60. Fewer are between 25 and 45, because most people of that age group are tied down by family and job responsibilities.

Many stories circulate both in Iran and in the Western press about harsh treatment of Iranian citizens, especially women, by the Pasdaran.

News stories have played up relatively isolated incidents, giving the impression that women are slapped or beaten regularly by Pasdaran and Hizbullahis (strongly religious citizens).

However, in three months of travel throughout Iran I encountered only one person with a first-hand account to back this up. This was a young woman who claimed she was hit over the head with a rifle by a Pasdar for wearing makeup.

Other women reported that they were given only a reprimand for similar offenses. If they retorted angrily to the Pasdar who had apprehended them, they were at worst taken to the *komiteh* office. There they were admonished to observe the Islamic dress code more carefully, handed a book on the subject, and released.

There can be inconveniences at times, however.

One woman in her mid-30s was accosted on the street by Pasdaran who didn't believe the man with her was her 20-year-old son until they produced their ID cards.

The Pasdaran I encountered in my travels were polite and helpful. Despite being so obviously a foreigner, I was never even questioned at the numerous checkpoints for intercity buses or as I walked on the streets of cities and towns.

Even some Iranians living abroad have the impression that an atmosphere of terror reigns inside the country.

"From reading the American newspapers, I thought that people were getting shot in the streets," says one young Iranian who studied in the US for five years.

When he returned to Iran six months ago, he says, "[I] was so nervous I didn't go outside my house for three weeks. But my sister laughed at me and said, 'What's the matter with you? Things are normal here now.'"

After several years of postrevolutionary chaos, the Pasdaran seem to have asserted enough control in Iran to ensure a secure atmosphere.



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"Even a year ago, the situation was worse," one young Iranian woman in Tehran says.

"There was getting to be a high crime rate, since there were so many refugees from the war zone coming here who had lost everything and were desperate. For the first time, we had to worry about locking our houses.

"There were a lot of people pretending to be Pasdaran to gain entry to someone's house and then steal everything," she says.

"But now the Pasdaran have cracked down very strictly, so the streets are safe again."

Still, there are signs of relaxation as well. At one time the Pasdaran raided parties and arrested people for listening to music, particularly Western music. But some Iranians say that the Pasdaran have greatly reduced such practices since Ayatollah Khomeini ordered them a year ago not to interfere with people's privacy. The Ayatollah also said that, in general, "Revolutionary institutions should not deal harshly with the people because it might make them shy away from Islam."

Tehran residents say that although there are instances of strictness, overall, the Pasdaran have been able to relax from the early years of the revolution.